

HOW I LEARNED TO LOVE MY FIRSTNESS

Being first comes with extra scrutiny and responsibility; people watch your work, your actions, and your words.

BY ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN

After winning a hard-fought special election in 1989 to fill the seat of South Florida's legendary Rep. Claude Pepper, I went on the Today show for my first interview as a member-elect. I was taken aback when I was asked how it felt to be the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress. "I don't think that is correct," I said, "but I'm glad to have won." Katie Couric interrupted and said, "Oh, trust me, we did the research, and you are indeed the first Latina in Congress." Well, OK. No pressure, right?

When I arrived in the United States at age 8 from my native Cuba, I would have looked at you like you were from Mars if you'd told me that I would someday serve in Congress. While my parents, Enrique and Amanda, set off to work, my challenge was to learn English. I learned and never stopped learning, eventually becoming a teacher and running a small private school. (Was I the first Hispanic woman in Miami-Dade to own a school? You'd have to ask Katie Couric.)

Like many women—and surely a few men—my interest in politics came from thinking beyond myself. My students' family members would come to me with their issues and concerns regarding anything from questions about immigration to how to navigate the myriad of government agencies and programs. I wanted to help my community on a larger scale, so I ran for state House and became Florida's first Hispanic woman in that chamber and, later, the first in the state Senate.

Like so many women who've broken professional barriers, I've had to learn to embrace my "firstness." Being first comes with extra scrutiny and responsibility; people watch your work,



(Richard A. Bloom)

your actions, and your words. You're expected to represent those who've paved the way for your firstness, and to set an example for those who will come after you.

After arriving in Washington, I had plenty of attention on my every move. My first task was to persuade my colleagues to grant me a seat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. I knew from day one that the committee was where I needed to be because in my district, with its large Cuban-American and Jewish constituencies, foreign affairs are a domestic topic. I wasn't shy; I told leadership and my South Florida colleagues that obtaining that seat was my first priority in D.C.—which I did. Years later, in one of my proudest moments as a public servant, I became chairwoman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

My philosophy toward succeeding as a Hispanic woman boils down to something quite simple that would serve other women well: Do everything like you're the first, even when you're not. I keep striving for excellence and working just as hard every day as I did when I was a new member. In my case, that means fighting for South Florida—working to preserve the beautiful Florida Keys and help small businesses, for instance, while championing global human rights. My focus on human rights globally was born from witnessing a repressive Cuban regime take control and oppress the people, while my interest in the plight of Israel came from my belief that we must stand with defenders of democracy who are under siege.

As I liked to say from the start of my time in Congress, I'm proud to have been the first, but I am happy that I won't be the last. Through the years, it's become a wonderful privilege for me to see more Hispanic women join the ranks of Congress, and to help them navigate the perils of Washington. Too often we view politics as a full-contact, zero-sum game. We should encourage the opposite. No one achieves on her own, and it's up to us—the firsts, and the nexts—to inspire future generations.

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